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## HEALTH OFFICIALS URGE RESIDENTS TO AVOID CONTACT WITH WILD AND STRAY ANIMALS



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**Walton County**— The Florida Department of Health in Walton County (DOH-Walton) urges residents to avoid contact with wild and stray animals to protect themselves from the risk of rabies exposure.

In Florida, raccoons, bats and foxes, and unvaccinated cats are the animals most frequently diagnosed with rabies. Other animals that are at high risk for rabies include skunks, otters, coyotes, bobcats, and stray or unvaccinated dogs and ferrets. Each year, (DOH-Walton) receives reports of rabid animals. Most recently a fox in the Freeport area, tested positive for rabies.

“Rabies is a potentially fatal disease. It is important not to handle wild animals, to be aware of unusual acting animals, and to keep pets vaccinated against rabies,” said Holly Holt

Rabies is transmitted through exposure to the saliva and nervous tissue from a rabid animal through a bite, scratch, or contact with mucous membranes such as the eyes, nose, or mouth. DOH-Walton works with Walton County Animal Control in responding to incidents of animal bites, tests animals for rabies through the Department of Health state laboratory, and quarantines animals as necessary. DOH- Walton also provides rabies vaccinations to victims of animal bites, the only known effective treatment for rabies prevention in humans.

The following are steps you can take to protect yourself and your loved ones against rabies:

- Keep rabies vaccinations up to date for all pets and at-risk livestock.
- Do not allow your pets to run free. Follow leash laws by keeping pets and livestock secured on your property. If your pet or livestock are bitten by a wild animal, seek veterinary assistance for the animal immediately and contact Walton County Animal Control at 850-892-8682.
- Support animal control in efforts to reduce feral and stray animal populations.”
- Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or regularly vaccinated.
- **Do not** handle, feed, or unintentionally attract wild animals with outdoor food sources such as uncovered trash or litter.
- **Never** adopt wild animals or bring them into your home.
- Teach children **never** to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly.

- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, and other similar areas, where they might come in contact with people and pets.
- Persons who have been bitten or scratched by wild or domestic animals should seek medical attention and report the injury to the DOH- Walton at 850-892-8021.

For further information on rabies, go to <http://www.floridahealth.gov/diseases-and-conditions/rabies/index.html>, or contact DOH-Walton at 850-892-8021.

The Department works to protect, promote and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county and community efforts.

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